

Heuristic One: Designing a Topic

The great freedom but also great challenge of this assignment is to select some aspect (event(s), human activity(s), phenomenon, etc.) that is related in some way to the sociocultural communities that interest you most. The range of possibilities is very wide. (For some ideas, see the assignment sheet under the section “assignment.”) The following heuristics should help you to identify some relevant aspect that you are interested in. (The key to almost any piece of writing is finding the angle, subject area, and target audience that holds your interest.)

1. Make a list of your personal, professional, academic and public interests.
2. Review the list to identify any communities or organizations related to these interests.
3. What is most interesting about these communities? Which of these are you currently a member? Which of these do you wish eventually to be a member?
4. What aspect of the communities or social organizations would you like to know more about?

5. Identify several possible aspects related to one or more of these communities that would be worth historicizing.

6. Of the possibilities you've listed, which, in W. B. Gallie's words, "set of past human actions must be felt by members of some human group to belong to its past, to be intelligible, and worth understanding from the point of view of its present interests"? Who are those members of the communities you listed? (This response would help you identify a target audience.)

7. What do you already know about the history of one or more of the possibilities you listed in #5?

8. Which of the possibilities are you most interested in?

9. Does your topic need to have time and/or place limits on it? If so, what are some possible time frames and/or places that you could focus on? Why these

rather than others? (If you can't answer this yet, you may need to do background reading and other research first. Then return to this question. See Heuristic Two.)

Heuristic Two: Conducting Historical Research

Once you have decided on a topic to historicize, you will need to do several kinds of research. The following prompts will help guide you through the kinds of research that will be most appropriate for the aspect you have chosen to focus on.

1. Background Reading: Regardless of the type of history you decide to write (archival, oral, or some combo), you will need to do some background reading in the area. Locate two or more sources (books, articles, webpages) of relevant histories to read.

A. Books: Visit the library's web-catalog to locate a book in your area. Try a key word search using words from your topic (e.g., history of fashion). Once you have identified a book, you can use several tools in the book entry to identify other possibilities. Finally, once you find a book you think is worth looking at, look at the books in the shelves around it.

B. Articles: You are probably most familiar with the Readers' Guide to Periodicals, and for this project that should serve you fine. (There are many, many bibliographies and abstracts devoted to specific subject areas. You might also try one of these.) Visit the library's web-catalog to do a key term or subject search on your topic in the Readers' Guide to Periodicals or another index.

C. Web Pages: You can do a general search for your subject area by using one of the megasearch engines (e.g., Dogpile) or individual search engines (e.g., Yahoo). You might search to see if the community or organization you are interested in has a Web site. Many sites contain a history which would provide you with a good starting point for your history.

Tip: As you read the histories, take note of who wrote them, the target audience, and the purpose. Consider, for example, that history of fashion written by someone at Chanel would read very differently than a history of fashion written by a cultural critic. Similarly, a history of Starbucks written by someone, especially a founder, of the company would be very different from a history of Starbucks written by a food critic or a historian of business practices.

2. Archival Data and Sources: Archival data can take many forms. These include, for example, diaries, or statistics, or personal, professional or governmental records, newspaper and magazine accounts, photographs, or other artifacts stored in museums or local historical societies. Anything that comes from the past that is related to your topic may be treated as an archival source.

3. Oral History: Depending on your topic, you may find it useful to talk to people who lived through the time period and/or event that you are writing about. One caution: You will need to be sure that you can gain access in person, via phone

or email to one or more relevant people. As with your background reading, take note of who is telling you about the experience. What was their subject position in relation to it? (e.g., were they the owner of a place? were they a former sports star? were they a fan? and so on). What do they have to gain and what do they have to lose by telling you their version of the event?

Tip: While everyone will need to do background reading--as all historians must--you will need to decide whether to rely on archival, oral, or some combination of historical data. Your decision needs to be made in relation to the topic, the time period and location covered, the availability of archival data and oral history subjects.

Heuristic Three: Analyzing Research Notes

As you found out in heuristic two, you will need to gather at least two, if not three, different types of notes to generate information that you will use to write your history. Here are suggestions for how to review and analyze the notes you take on your readings or oral interviews.

1. Background Reading: Based on your reading of two or more sources that deal with general background information related to your topic:

A. Briefly summarize what you have learned from these.

B. Discuss the (apparent) subject position of the person who wrote the history (i.e., what is the relation between the historian and the subject). Also identify the target audience for this history (e.g., is this written for a general American audience? for fans? for shoppers? buyers? what age group? is it academic, that is, meant for a history scholar? or a history class?). How might these factors have influenced what the historian selected to tell and how the historian told the story?

C. What points from your reading will be important to use in your history?

D. What quotations did you find that might be useful? Where can you use them?

2. Archival Research: What documents and/or artifacts did you study that are related to your history? How are they related? Which ones will be useful to include in your history? If you examined documents, what quotations from these might be useful? If you examined artifacts, what descriptions of these can you draw that will be helpful in your paper? Will you include photographs or drawings in your history? If so, which ones and why?

3. Oral History Research: Who did you identify as important sources to interview for your history? Why did you choose these people?

1. Briefly summarize what they told you.
2. Are the accounts similar to each other and to the other reading you have done? If not, how can you account for the differences?
3. What quotations from your interview might be useful in your history? Why?
4. After reviewing all of your research notes, what questions remain? How will you address those questions? Who can you ask for more information? What else might you read?

Heuristic Four: Writing Up Your History

By now you should have begun gathering and analyzing your research notes. As you will see, you probably have far more information than you can possibly use. As you draft, however, you may also find holes (missing information, or points that need more development); at this point you might need to do a bit more research. Remember, this is a recursive process; you will move back and forth between researching and writing. *In the end, however, You will not be able to use everything you have uncovered in your research.* You will need to find a way to select those relevant pieces that best fit your purpose and your target audience. The prompts below should help you decide on what is relevant and useful.

1. Developing the Rhetorical Situation

A. List the possible audiences to whom you might address your history. (Tip: consider W. B. Gallie's observation that: "To be studied as history, a set of past human actions must be felt by members of some human group to belong to its past, to be intelligible, and worth understanding from the point of view of its present interests. " For your topic, who is that human group?)

B. List the possible purposes for writing your history (and in turn reasons audiences would read it). Historians write histories for any number of reasons: to provide an explanation for past events that have yet to be written--to leave a

record; to challenge and correct past records; to build on and extend past explanations, and so on. People read histories to learn about the past, of course. But consider why some people are drawn to some histories and away from others.

C. List possible contexts where readers might read your history (e.g., publishing outlets--magazine, newspaper, popular books, scholarly journal or book; glossy brochures, on the web, etc.)

Remember that audiences, purposes and contexts work in tandem with each other. Writing is always written for someone, for some purpose and for a particular outlet. You may have a strong sense about why you want write this history, to whom and where it would show up. If not, review the above lists and add to them until you arrive at an appropriate and useful rhetorical situation for your topic.

2. Deciding on a Form for the Paper

As with any writing, the form or genre depends on the rhetorical situation. The one thing that all histories tend to share, however, is that they usually are presented as a chronological narrative--a story of the past, hence, the term his/story. (Note some have challenged this term, rewriting it to read her/story; however, you view it, it is a story that explains some past event or phenomenon.)

If you have gathered lots of quotes (either from documents or oral interviews) that show the perspectives of those who have lived through the event or phenomenon, it is best to let them speak in their own voice. That is, use the quotes where they will help illustrate what happened and how those who were there felt about it.

You can open in any number of ways: a flashback or flash forward, a discussion of the phenomenon, a reason to read the history, an anecdote, etc. Review the histories you read for background for some ideas. Whatever you choose to do, your opening should function to give your reader a reason for reading the history.

The body of a history usually presents the story. The ending should relate to your purpose and the lesson you want your reader to learn. You can do this through an anecdote, a question, a pithy quote, a concluding statement. (Again, reviewing the histories you've read for this project will help you see a range of possibilities for your ending.) There is no one way; you'll need to find the one that works best for your purposes.